All in the family... with sisters Lata and Asha!

She may not be worshipped, but she is not unsung either. With the immense potential that is in her,Usha Mangeshkar fits into any groove with effortless ease. Be it a soul-soothing bhajan for *Jai Santoshi Ma* or a hip-hop pub song *Mungda*, she has sung it all with equal panache. Today Usha Mangeshkar, the youngest sister (brother Hridaynath is the youngest of them all) of the reverred Mangeshkar clan, is back with a bang with her remix album *Mungda* all set to take the younger generation by storm. It is her proud claim that the essence of her songs remain unscathed even in the remix mould.

Meeting with Usha is an experience of a lifetime. Walking down memory lane, this soft and gentle, ageless diva reminisces about her past and present, the times that were and the time that is. Beginning from the beginning, Usha recalls emotionally, "I was barely five years old when my father, the legendary Dinanath Mangeshkar passed away. I was too young to remember anything about him. It was Lata *didi*'s good fortune to be blessed with his guidance. I wasn't so fortunate. But, being the youngest among the sisters, I was the most pampered. Moreover, I never had to shoulder the responsibility of looking after the family either.

I never felt the need to work in order to earn money. Neither did I ever feel the need to work in order to earn a name for myself. Among other things, fame in our family is hereditary. My father, Dinanath Mangeshkar, is a legend. The Mangeshkar name is so big. No one can rise above it, no one can touch it. Delete the Usha from my name and keep intact the Mangeshkar. That much fame will suffice for me." Modest Mangeshkar, the name suits Usha oh-so-perfectly. In fact, it suits the entire clan. Even big sis Lata who has genuinely, over the years, shirked fame and instead become more humble with passing time.

No wonder, Usha, who has always lived with Lata, is very, very close to her "*badi didi*". Usha explains, "I am more attached to Lata *didi* than Asha. After all, we've lived under one roof all our lives. She has always been a mother-figure to me. And after my mother expired five years back, it is all the more so."In fact, Usha reveals that there were only advantages being Lata's youngest sister. She recalls, "Never in my life did I have to go through the 'struggle' phase. The industry welcomed me into its fold with open arms. Everybody cajoled and coaxed me into singing. I had said 'no' to singing initially but later on music director C. Ramachandra coaxed me into it. It is just that people kept saying,'God has gifted you with a good voice, so you must sing; your voice suits such-and-such song perfectly, so you must sing.' So, before I knew it, I had joined the bandwagon."

But, neither did Usha look towards Lata for help, nor did she expect the industry to cow-tow to her simply because she was *the* Lata Mangeshkar's little sister. No, she went about her business absolutely normally without name dropping or behaving like a princess. In fact, Usha reveals, "When I informed Lata*didi* about my decision to enter the field of playback singing, she gave me the green signal alright, but apart from that she never interfered. Yes, she had forbidden me to act in films and since I myself didn't like being an actress, I didn't look in that direction at all. But as a singer, half the time, Lata *didi* wasn't even aware of what I was upto. I would go for my recordings, return home and tell her I've finished recording such-and-such song. She would ask me how it went, and I'd reply good. That was it. Which song was recorded, who was the music-director, these questions were never asked, never discussed at home. Sometimes she would listen to a song on the radio and remark, 'The singer has really done a good job. Did you sing this song?' That was as far as she would go. Beyond that, nothing." And that also included her prerogative to sing for noted music director O.P. Nayyar with whom her "Lata*didi*" was reported to have had differences and, therefore, never sang for him. But Usha? She could.

Usha also belies the popular myth of the Mangeshkar monopoly. Unfortunately, Lata Mangeshkar was often accused of having stymied the career path of many a talented newcomer. Finally, it's the youngest of them all who blows the lid on this buzz which has gone on for over half-a-century now.Usha maintains that part of the aspersions cast against Lata are because of her unprecedented success story and partly because Lata herself has never deemed it necessary to offer explanations. In her own words, "These are plain rumours, some spread by friends, some spread by foes.I will tell you of incidents which have occurred right in front of my eyes. Whenever there was a duet to be sung, music directors would request Lata*didi* to recommend another co-singer. But, she never ever asked them to take me on. Instead, she recommended newcomers saying, `This new girl sings very well; make her sing this duet with me.' This hasn't happened once or twice, it has happened many a time. I will not name the newcomers because today they are top singers and may not like me naming them; but I know for myself which singers Lata *didi* had recommended in her hey days. The fact remains that whenever Lata couldn't sing for any given reason, if she had a sore throat, or she had to go abroad, and music directors

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In perfect tuning... with music director Jaidev!

would inevitably request her to recommend singers, she has never ever recommended me.

"People spread rumours, either out of jealousy or out of insecurity. It's also a ploy to gain some quick publicity. It's like this — people ask who said such-and-such a thing against Lata Mangeshkar and then that person becomes the focus of attention. I cannot tell you definitely, but in all probability certain music directors might also be the culprits. They might have told certain singers things like, `We wanted you to sing this particular song or duet, but Lata wasn't keen on your singing it.' This could have happened, I'm not sure."

Obviously then, Lata is not the heavy hand she is made out to be. Not for outside singers, and most definitely not for her own sisters — Asha and Usha. Usha defends, "Lata has never hampered my career, Asha's career or anybody's career for that matter. You tell me, if Lata hadn't allowed Asha to come up in life, would Asha have ever become such a famous singer today, such a big name to reckon with? The simple truth of the matter is that we were never aware of the highs and lows in Asha's career. She wasn't with us at that time. She was working separately. We had no idea of the songs she was singing, the music directors she was working with, which films she was singing for. We were totally at sea in this matter. As for other singers, all who had the talent and the perseverance, have made it to the top, got due recognition and fame. They are at the helm of affairs today. What more proof can anyone want?"

"I've worked with R.D Burman too,but I haven't sung a lot of songs with him. That's because Asha's voice most suited the kind of music R.D made. They made a hit team. Nobody else could have sung those songs other than Asha"

Asha with R.D. Burman: Her master's voice!

Point taken.But undeniably, Lata Mangeshkar was the reigning queen of Hindi film music while Usha held sway in the Marathi film industry. Was it a tacit understanding between the two sisters that Lata would rule the roost in the Hindi film industry while Usha Mangeshkar would take charge of the Marathi film industry? Dumbfounded by the ridiculousness of the question, Usha Mangeshkar counters, "Nothing was planned. Destiny might have preordained the course of my career, but I certainly didn't plan anything. If I ruled over Marathi cinema, as you say, it's not out of design, but thanks to destiny. Who could predict 50 years ago that Lata *didi* would go on to make an indelible mark in this industry? Nobody. We were given the opportunity to sing, we sang to the best of our ability. I began my career in the Hindi films and later on went on to sing for Marathi films. That's it."

Usha Mangeshkar's assosciation with Marathi film music is inextricably linked with her assosciation with Dada Kondke,the uncrowned king of dubious cinema. He may also go down in the Guinness Book Of Records as the master-entertainer who gave six jubilee hits in a row. But, the very name Dada Kondke is synonymous with double-meaning, lewd dialogues. How could Usha Mangeshkar, of all people, lend her voice to the most devastatingly dubious songs? Usha replies tersely, "I don't want to talk much about Dada Kondke because he is no more. I'll tell you as much as is necessary. Dada Kondke was into *tamashas*. And he did a phenomenal job of them. They were a kind of parody on the political scenario of the day.Thanks to these *tamashas*, he got a break in Marathi films. People lapped his performances up and in due course of time, he opened his own production company.

"I was working with Dada Kondke since his *tamasha* days and I continued working with him in his films also. To tell you the truth, I didn't realize that those lyrics had a double-meaning hidden in them. That realization just didn't dawn on me. I've never been in the kind of atmosphere where such language is used, where double-meaning lines are exchanged and understood. Such things are unheard of at our home; we didn't learn such things at school or from our teachers either. Moreover, when we see the lyrics in the form of poetry, it becomes all the more difficult to comprehend, to read between the lines. It's only when people started calling me up and began saying things like, `Why have you sung such-and-such a song?You shouldn't have', that I realized that I had committed a mistake. I felt bad,

really very bad. I felt I had done something wrong, even though it was done unknowingly.

"Having realized that I was tricked into singing dirty double-meaning lyrics, I became extremely cautious and careful while dealing with Dada Kondke and Ram Laxman. I would show the lyrics to a renowned Marathi poet (I will not name him), and request him to underline those lines which were objectionable. If those lines weren't changed, I would reject the song. Inspite of that, Ram Laxman and Dada Kondke have made me sing some songs which were objectionable, *jabardasti mujhse gaane gavaye hain.* But, because we shared good relations and because I didn't want to strain my relationship with either of them, I have sung a few songs my conscience did not permit me to sing. But by and large, I've rejected more songs than I've sung."

Luckily for Usha, this kind of thing didn't happen with her in the Hindi film industry. In fact, she has nothing but fond memories about her years in the Hindi film industry. Getting into a nostalgic mode, she unwinds, "Those were the days. The atmosphere during recording was so nice, pleasant, homely and happy. There was respect for seniors, affection for juniors, mutual regard and admiration for colleagues. Like, when (Mohammad) Rafi*saab* entered the sound studio, everybody stood up out of respect, greeted him and brought him inside. Rafi*saab* was a gem of a person, very warm-hearted, nice and softspoken. They don't make them like him anymore."

Usha recalls their duet, *Sainath tere hazaro hath.* Rafi was supposed to start the song with a *shayari* and she had to continue with the song starting with the word *Sainath.* He would start the song with the shayari, but she'd stop in her tracks after uttering *Sainath.* Usha made this mistake not once, not twice but around 22 times! Exasperated, she gave up and requested actor-director Manoj Kumar to have the song sung by some other singer. But Rafi wouldn't hear of it. "He told me, `Doesn't matter if you repeat the same mistake 25 times; if anybody is going to sing this duet with me, it's going to be you.' You see, he realized that it would break my heart if I wouldn't be able to pull it off. He understood that I'd be bitterly disappointed. I was like a younger sister to him. This affection shone through in our work."

Usha laments that today, this kind of *apnapan* is missing in the music industry. She says, "Today, the scenario has changed. Singers sing on the track and leave. Who sang this *mukhda* or that *anthra,* nobody knows. Do you know, whatever the bone of contention between Rafi*saab* and Lata*didi* on the professional front, it remained between the two of them. It never affected *my* equation with him. So, I have nothing but sweet memories of him."

About the ever-so popular and lively Kishore Kumar, contrary to his eccentric image, Usha insists that behind the mask of madness was a very intelligent and creative mind. "With Kishor*da* in the sound studio, there was never a dull moment. It was so much fun and joy working with a genius like him. I've been fortunate enough to share good working relationships not only with my contemporary singers but also all my music directors."

Though Usha Mangeshkar was always in perfect tuning with all her music directors, there surely must have been one particularly favourite who could elicit the best from her. Usha ripostes, "I have no personal favourites amongst music directors as such, but I particularly liked Madan Mohan's style a lot. Who else can compose the kind of music Madan Mohan composed? I've sung maximum number of songs for him in my career. He was not just a friend, he was more than that; he was family!"

When it comes to family, statistics show that Usha Mangeshkar hasn't sung too many songs under the guidance of her famous brother-in-law, the late R. D. Burman. Clearing the popular misconception, Usha Mangeshkar states, "I've worked with R.D Burman too, but I haven't sung a lot of songs with him. That's because Asha's voice most suited the kind of music R.D

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All smiles... with Dimple and mama Mangeshkar!

made. They made a hit team. Nobody else could have sung those songs other than Asha."

The case rests as far as the brother-in-law is concerned.But how come curiously brother dearest Hridaynath didn't have Usha singing to his tunes either? For instance, *Lekin* had only Lata at her best. Unfazed by this line of questioning, Usha explains patiently, "*Lekin* was Hriday's film. If I didn't sing for *Lekin* it is simply because there was no song for me to sing. *Jagah hi nahi thi gaane ke liye*. It is our firm belief that one singer should lend her voice for one actress throughout the film. And that voice was Lata *didi*'s. All the songs were picturized on Dimple, apart from one dance which was picturized on Hema Malini. That song was sung by Asha*ji*. So where was the opportunity for me to sing?"

Without opportunity, talent remains latent.If one keenly observes Usha Mangeshkar's career, one realizes that she has carved a niche for herself inspite of the very limited opportunities she was given to voice her talent. *Inkaar* and *Jai Santoshi Ma* were small budget films.But her all-time hits —*Mungda mungda* in *Agent Vinod* and *Main to aarti utaru re* in *Jai Santoshi Ma* changed the course of destiny of these films and put them in an enviable position with the A Grade films that released at the same time. It is one thing to belong to the top league and rule. It is quite another to accomplish what Usha has, given the modest set-ups she was associated with. Tell her about it, and she characteristically downplays her achievements. " Why any film is a success, nobody can tell. No one can pinpoint the secret behind its success. Might be because of the music or because of the script. Why was *Mungda mungda* a rage, nobody knows.What is the meaning of *Mungda*, nobody knows. Why is *Mungda* so popular even today, nobody knows — neither does Rajesh Roshan know, nor did the late lyricist Majrooh Sultanpuri, who wrote the song knew, nor do I know. It just clicked. Even for the remix, everyone is publicizing only the *Mungda* number. There are other songs too in my remix album which are equally good, but because *Mungda* is the most popular, the album is called *Mungda. Mungda* sells, so *Mungda* it will be. So be it."

Now, before people jump to the predictable conclusion that Usha has got onto the remix bandwagon for a shot of fame and money, that's not true. The real reason? In Usha's inimitable honest style, "The original songs have come about in front of our eyes. We have seen the kind of effort that was put into the making of those songs. There would be a sitting, the story and situation behind the song would be discussed, which singer's voice suited which hero, which singer would give her voice to the heroine, all these factors were taken into account. The music director, lyricist, singer, director would get together and keeping the situation in mind, ten different lyrics would be penned, five different tunes would be composed and finally out of that, one would be selected. That was the kind of effort put in for a song. And today, people take that song, break it into bits and pieces within five minutes. The essence of the song vanishes! Why do you tamper with something so old, beautiful and precious? Why don't you do something fresh, something new and innovative? On the one hand you malign what is old, and on the other you don't think twice before using, misusing and abusing it when it serves your purpose!

"So, when my nephew's company — Music Curry — was keen that I come out with a remix album, I made myself clear that first and foremost, I do not appreciate remixes. Secondly, I won't tamper with the original songs. The entire combination of the music, the rhythm, the lyrics must be kept intact. They agreed to my condition and thereafter only the *Mungda* remix took birth. The reason I came out with my remix is simple. I made them a little modern, but I made sure the essence of the songs remained unscathed and untarnished. Moreover, nobody else will now be able to tamper with my songs." Sound logic. Nobody ought to mess with Usha's madrigals. After all, she's a Mangeshkar!

—Rashmi Ail

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Usha: Reliving the* Mungda *magic!